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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses considerations in planning a new school for visually impaired students in Nigeria. Site considerations touch upon safety, maximum educational achievement, adequate space for practicing mobility and future expansion, catchment area, and financial involvement. Curriculum considerations include use of a braille production machine, instruction in natural sciences, and coursework to prepare the student for life. Physical development factors are reviewed, including buildings, lighting systems, and a development plan for special rooms. (CL)

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PLANNING A NEW SCHOOL FOR VISUALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN IN NIGERIA

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Nigeria is a complex country. It has been referred to as one of the fastest growing countries in black Africa in terms of technological development.

On several occasions, the country has been referred to as the "giant of Africa."¹

However, some see Nigeria as a "country in a hurry."² Some of its citizens (mostly the elites) wish the oil boom money (revenue got from the sale of oil) be spent much more wisely than is the case at the moment.

These descriptions or pronouncements about Nigeria has implications to its educational planning. They call for much more careful planning in the country's educational pursuits.

Current observations about a few existing special schools in Nigeria leaves no one in doubt that certain guiding principles are needed in order to plan better for the future.

Blindness, either total or partial has many social, psychological and philosophical interpretations in Nigeria. While a few regard handicap condition as one which prevents the child to perform any work which eyesight is essentially needed, majority of the people (mostly in rural areas) see

such a child as being punished by evil spirits for an offence the child, his parents or his grand parents have committed. This feeling amongst the child, his parents and the public add to social, psychological and emotional feelings which are associated with the child's development. It also has implications for educational planning. Small-pox which used to be a major disease that cause blindness in Nigeria has now been totally eradicated. This was made possible by an effective immunization programme of the World Health Organization (W.H.O.). In the past, and in some parts of the country, children who became blind due to this disease were denied proteinous foods like eggs. Eating eggs by these children will encourage the "gods" to further punish the family. This major food content is necessary for the healthy development of the child.

However, no matter what the belief is, visually impaired children lack perception of light and have limited visual field. The partially sighted child may have some residual vision. These visual impairments enable the child to follow the curriculum and normal regime in ordinary schools. The aim of education in Nigeria is to equip the children to take their places in sighted world with confidence. Although the curriculum for these children are yet to be developed properly, the National policy on

Education advocates for an "appropriate curriculum with those of ordinary schools".³

For long, the practice in Nigeria is to provide a Special School for these children. Of recent a few "bright" ones have been integrated (mainstreamed) into some selected Post Primary Schools. Most of these schools are owned by religious organisations. Government at all levels are yet to give a practical approach to the practice. The National Policy on Education advocated for this practice as far back as 1977.

A visit to these Special Schools, reveals inadequacy of building and an impression of wonderful atmosphere in liveliness, cheerfulness and affection. A longer visit will give a clear emergence of such characteristics, especially the affection between the staff and the handicapped pupils. They take a great pride in each other.

However, these observations raised some contradictions. Can the visually impaired children and staff demonstrate such an affection, liveliness and cheerfulness while they exist in such "awful inadequacy of building?" Is this a unique characteristic of visually impaired children? Perhaps such a contradiction is best left for future research. It may well be that these handicapped children are just coping up with the situation or their reactions over-

estimated.

A clear guiding principle is needed in order to plan better for the future. The following factors are crucial in planning a new school for a developing country like Nigeria.

- (a) Availability of water, medical and social services
- (b) Trained personnel and supportive staff
- (c) Fund to ensure continuity, legal backing
- (d) Transportation and resource problems.

SITE CONSIDERATION

- (a) Safety Consideration: Most parts of Nigeria have dangerous structures and visible hazards (like rocks, forests, rivers, lakes, etc). Such areas should be avoided. Proness to traffic risk is also dangerous for visually handicapped children.
- (b) Maximum Educational Achievement: The selection of such a site should promote maximum educational achievement for such children. It must always be remembered that these children are human. Most of the factors that affect the learning process of a

normal child also affect the learning process of visually impaired children. This is in addition to emotional, psychological and social factors that go with their disabilities. Planning of the new school should relate to the real needs of the children who have these additional problems. On the whole, these problems should be applied as part of the integral issues. A noisy atmosphere is not conducive for learning for these children.

(c) Adequate Space for Practicing Mobility and Future Expansion:

Mobility training is an important aspect in visual handicap education. Adequate space for mobility practices is very essential. As at the moment, there is plenty of land in Nigeria for such consideration. The layout plan of the site must be clearly mapped and future expansion of the village, town or city in which the school is to be located. It is a common experience that what used to be a vast, neglected piece of land has been developed within a short period of time into large villages, towns and even cities in Nigeria.

It is essential that the site should provide an attractive and stimulating environment in which these

children would be happy to pass, probably the whole of their life.

- (d) Catchment Area: The need to consider where and how the children will be drawn from is important. Long distance travelling for these children may provide some resentment and creates lack of interest. it is also important to note that the planning for a boarding school may not be the same as those of day schools (most states are now advocating and practicing day schools). Boarding schools may have wider catchment areas. Poor communications and lack of statistical data for handicapped people in Nigeria are additional problems for this consideration.

However, the number of children and future national educational programmes for these children should be considered.

- (e) Financial Involvement: The objective of setting up the new school determines to some extent the cost of the venture. Land compensation (if not given free as practiced in some parts of the country) can be very costly. Although the aim is to provide common facilities to the new school, where it is situated in the country tend to affect the cost of such

facilities. This is largely due to the ethnical and geographical differences. The planning should not overlook these variations. A school aimed at community services may be less expensive. This tends to attract community contributions.

It is important to note that in a situation of economic difficulties, ownership of the school is a crucial factor. Ownership by Federal or State Governments, Local Government, Community or Private Organisation calls for different provision and planning. I will advocate for a community services model. Whatever model is planned for, the school should not be too large, and the curriculum should provide a part from academic pursuits, rehabilitative and vocational aspects. This will be of aid to the graduates to survive in terms of unemployment era.

CURRICULUM CONSIDERATIONS

Curriculum development and use of teaching aids depends to some extent on the ingenious and experiences of the teacher to be employed. It is better for each visually handicapped child to possess his own parkin braille, typewriter and tape recorder. He should also retain them when he leaves the school. Typing should form part of the school

curriculum.

Staffing should be sufficiently generous to allow individual attention. This is important particularly acquiring reading skills.

It is essential to have a braille production machine and not depend on importation of braille papers and books. Trained technicians should be available for operation and maintenance of such machines and apparatus.

Every effort should be made to include the teaching of natural science although this can give rise to great difficulties for the visually handicapped pupils. These are subjects that demand practical demonstration.

Nonetheless, science teaching should be a 'sine qua non'⁵ in all schools for the visually handicapped.

Provision should also be made for physical education which they can enjoy without risk. Current researches tend to point out that except in very rare cases, there is no need to prevent any visually handicapped child from participating in physical activities."⁶ Greater safety precautions need to be taken than for sighted children.

As much as possible, the visually handicapped children should take courses which will lead to preparing them for similar public examination like General Certificate in Education (G.C.E.) or Teacher's Certificate. Emphasis

should be on preparing them for a successful sustaining of life. An aspect of vocational guidance should be considered.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

- (a) Buildings: Should have facilities for use of wheelchairs, ramp, suitable steps, toilet compartments (large enough to accommodate wheel-chair) and doors of sufficient width are essential.

The greatest planning implication of the visually handicapped is the desirability of teaching such children in much smaller groups than is normally possible. Suggestive number of twelve per class is desirable. This would enable the teacher to give individual tuition.

- (b) Lighting System: Uncomfortable feelings to both staff and pupils have been reported when using buildings in which the lighting systems are not fixed properly. Some have complained of frequent severe headaches which they attribute to the lighting system of some special schools.

Recessed fluorescent fittings of high degree of artificial illumination is recommended.

Colours of bulbs should be varied. It is also important to avoid large windows where day lighting is concerned. This is to avoid the consequent danger of large expanses of sky causing glare, which could be distressing for people with sight problem. If a large window is needed, anti-glare products can be applied and venetian blinds used. These are expensive and are not easy to find in Nigeria.

(c) Development Plan (Special Rooms)

As has been mentioned, it is important to encourage the visually partial pupils to use their residual vision at all times. They must be encouraged to learn, live and work in normal surroundings and eventually cope at home, work place on equal footing with their peers.

In block planning, some essential provisions are important. In meeting the desired goal of educational provision for the visually handicapped, the following special rooms are to be included:

- (i) A career guidance room
- (ii) A medical services area
- (iii) A large hall for physical activity
or an open space
- (iv) A resource room

- (v) Dining area associated with the kitchen

Some of the rooms can be used for a double purpose to save cost. For example, the career guidance room can be used as an assessment room for visiting professional or a combined dining and circulation room, etc. It is essential that various colours should be used for the rooms to provide variety.

The mentioned special rooms are in addition to the classrooms. It is essential to have a compartment in the resource room to service and maintain some special equipment like braille machine and typewriters.

Enough space must be provided for growing flowers and fruit trees. Visually handicapped children love the smell of flowers. It keeps them happy and it is important in planning a new school. Periodic checks on facilities that might constitute a danger should be carried out as a matter of policy. This is more so with laboratory buildings.

C O N C L U S I O N

The article aimed at highlighting some factors which are crucial in planning a new school for the visual handicap. It has avoided extensive discussion on all aspect of curriculum development. The writer is currently writing an article on this topic which would spell out details. It is hoped that the suggestions would be useful to Special Education teachers, planners and educational policy makers.

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